

**04/08/21 Thursday**

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'Dangerous Practice': Pennsylvania Attorney General Warns of 'Huge' Market for False Vaccine Cards  
by [Mary F.](#)

Vaccination cards are issued by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as written proof that individuals have been inoculated against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes the novel coronavirus.

Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro this week warned the public that there is already a "dangerous" market of people selling fake vaccination cards online.

"We're seeing a huge market for these false cards online," Shapiro told [The New York Times](#).

"This is a dangerous practice that undermines public health."

Shapiro's statement comes after 45 state attorney generals last week called on online platforms like Twitter, Shopify and eBay to crack down on the sale of false vaccine cards.

"We want to see them stop immediately," Shapiro said, referring to the entities selling fake cards. "And we want to see the companies take serious and immediate action."

Saoud Khalifah, the founder of Fakespot, a company that offers capabilities to detect fake listings and reviews online, told The Times that potentially thousands of fake vaccination cards are being sold online.

The fake cards, selling for \$20 to \$60 each, are widespread on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Shopify, eBay and Etsy.

"We found hundreds of online stores selling the cards, potentially thousands were sold," Khalifah explained.

Many people buy fake vaccine cards to trick pharmacists into providing them a vaccine, Khalifah explained. Some people enter a false date for a first inoculation on the card so that they can get a second dose quicker, since some vaccination sites give priority to people who are due to receive their second jabs.

In a statement to the Times, the CDC confirmed that it is "aware of cases of fraud regarding counterfeit COVID-19 vaccine cards," and warned people against sharing images of their vaccine cards on social media.

The FBI is also urging people not to post photos of their vaccine cards to social media websites, warning that "personal information could be stolen to commit fraud."

According to an [FBI statement](#), the unauthorized use of an official government's seal, such as the CDC seal, is a crime.

"By misrepresenting yourself as vaccinated when entering schools, mass transit, workplaces, gyms, or places of worship, you put yourself and others around you at risk of contracting COVID-19. Additionally, the unauthorized use of an official government agency's seal (such as HHS or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)) is a crime, and may be

punishable under Title 18 United States Code, Section 1017, and other applicable laws,” the FBI notes.

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US Expresses 'Grave Concern' Over Reports of Atrocities Against Tigrayans in Ethiopia  
by [Mary F.](#)

The United Nations on Wednesday warned that the humanitarian situation in Tigray, Ethiopia, where Tigrayan people in the Amhara state of Ethiopia and neighboring Eritrea are being murdered by military forces, remains “dire.”

White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan expressed “grave concern” to Ethiopian Deputy Prime Minister Demeke Mekonnen on Thursday over the escalating humanitarian crisis in the country against Tigrayans, an ethnic group in the Tigray Region in Northern Ethiopia. In a statement obtained by [The Hill](#), National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne confirmed that Sullivan and Mekonnen discussed “critical steps to address the crisis, including expanded humanitarian access, cessation of hostilities, departure of foreign troops, and independent investigations into atrocities and human rights violations.”

“Mr. Sullivan stressed that the United States is ready to help Ethiopia address the crisis, building on our longstanding bilateral partnership and friendship,” Horne added.

The Associated Press on Wednesday published a disturbing [report](#) where Tigrayan refugees described violent atrocities, such as rapes, beatings and murders, by Ethiopian military forces. The report also notes that Tigrayan people have had their ethnic identities removed from newly issued identity cards, in what many are referring to as ethnic cleansing by the Ethiopian government.

Following the publication of AP’s report, the Ethiopian Foreign Minister released a statement calling the Tigray People’s Liberation Front a “criminal enterprise” that is “armed to its teeth.” The deputy UN aid coordinator in Ethiopia, Wafaa Said, also told [Reuters](#) last month that five medical facilities in the region had reported at least 516 rape cases, a statistic that most likely underrepresents the number of actual number of rapes due to the stigma linked with rape and the obliteration of health facilities.

“Women say they have been raped by armed actors, they also told stories of gang rape, rape in front of family members and men being forced to rape their own family members under the threat of violence,” Said said at the time.

The violence in Ethiopia first began in November 2020 after government forces cracked down against locals in the Tigray region after Tigrayan officials attempted to hold their own elections. Although the Ethiopian government has admitted that Eritrean forces, namely the Ethiopian National Defense Forces, are in the Tigray region, it has also stated that the allegations of atrocities are “slanted” and “portray the federal government as the instigator of all crimes,” The Hill reported.



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Georgetown University to Offer Bachelor's Degree Programs to US Inmates  
by [Mary F.](#)

The US has the largest prison population in the world, as well as the highest per-capita incarceration rate. Georgetown University's Prisons and Justice Initiative was first established in 2016 to address mass incarceration issues in the US.

In a [press release](#) issued this week, Georgetown said it would build on its Prisons and Justice Initiative (PJI) and offer around two dozen Maryland prison inmates the chance to obtain a bachelor's degree through a scholarship program.

The new program is an extension of the university's Prison Scholars Program, which has offered non-degree programs at the DC jail since 2018.

"We are excited to build upon the success of the Prison Scholars Program and provide an opportunity for students to earn a college degree while incarcerated," [PJI Director Marc Howard](#) said in the release. "A degree from Georgetown and the interdisciplinary coursework behind it will prepare our graduates to reenter their communities and the workforce with pride in their academic achievements."

The program expansion was funded by a \$1 million three-year grant from the [Andrew W. Mellon Foundation](#), a private foundation that "seeks to build just communities where ideas and imagination can thrive."

Maryland inmates who have at least a high school or a GED diploma will be able to enroll in the program, which is expected to start in the next academic year.

The 25 inmates who enroll in the program will be able to study cultural humanities, interdisciplinary social science or global intellectual history.

The degree will require 120 credit hours and will take about five years to complete. Students will also have access to Georgetown library resources, such as academic support, library, research assistance, career counseling and comprehensive reentry services.

The program will allow inmates to continue to develop their skills so that they can attain "financial stability" and "socio-economic mobility" following their release.

"After their release, many returning citizens struggle to find employment due to their criminal record, a lack of formal education, and large gaps in resumes. The Prison Scholars Program equips them to overcome these hurdles and creates a pathway to financial stability and socioeconomic mobility," the press release explains.

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Manila, Beijing Promise to Finalize South China Sea Code of Conduct Amid Fishing Boat Showdown  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

As a dispute over Chinese fishing boats in waters claimed by the Philippines heats up, the US is rushing to capitalize on the situation, painting China as a threat and sending naval forces to the region. Amid the rancor, Manila and Beijing are attempting to springboard finalization of the long-discussed code of conduct for the South China Sea.

Since early March, some 220 Chinese fishing boats have been tied together in a formation off the coast of Whitsun Reef, a V-shaped island in the Spratly Islands that is claimed by the Philippines as well as China and Vietnam. China has claimed the boats are sheltering from bad weather. Manila has asked them to leave, and begun lodging daily protests with Beijing over their continued presence.

Washington has long postured as the global policeman and enforcer of international law, including challenging China's claims over islands in the South China Sea. Amid this dispute, the United States has shifted a carrier strike group and amphibious ready group, each headed by an aircraft carrier, into the South China Sea.

[On Wednesday](#), US State Department spokesperson Ned Price told reporters "An armed attack against the Philippines' armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft in the Pacific, including in the South China Sea, will trigger our obligations under the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty," claiming the vessels are part of China's maritime militia, despite Beijing's continued insistence they are regular fishing boats.

"As the situation in the West Philippine Sea evolves, we keep all our options open in managing the situation, including leveraging our partnerships with other nations such as the United States," Pentagon spokesperson Arsenio Andolong also said.

Reviving Code of Conduct Talks

However, the situation is not nearly so dire: Chinese diplomats have met not only with their Philippine counterparts several times in recent days, but with other members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as well. China is not a member of ASEAN, but retains a working partnership with the 10-nation bloc. At these talks, the prevailing concern by both sides has been reviving and finalizing talks on the [Code of Conduct](#) (CoC) in the South China Sea, which would standardize maritime interactions in the waterway, including the question of where each nation's fishing fleets could go, but which were paused due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020.

Six nations have [made overlapping claims](#) on small islands and vast stretches of sea in the waterway, including China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, and Vietnam. A 2016 ruling by the Hague's Permanent Court of Arbitration found in favor of the Philippines against China, dismissing China's Nine-Dash Line claim over South China Sea islands. However, the court also refused to award Manila the islands in question or to make any decisions about sovereignty. China and Taiwan both rejected the ruling, the [latter having introduced](#) the Nine-Dash Line as a Chinese claim in 1947, prior to its loss in the Chinese Civil War and the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) two years later. The seafloor surrounding the islands is believed to be rich in hydrocarbon deposits.

Since the ruling, China has shifted its claims toward a ["four-sha" \(four sands\) position](#), based on claims to four island chains - the Paracel Islands (Xisha), Spratly Islands (Nansha), Pratas Islands (Dongsha) and the Macclesfield Bank (Zhongsha) - and their surrounding areas of raised seafloor, together amounting to about 80% of the South China Sea.



On Tuesday, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin, as well as Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, Malaysian Foreign Minister Hishammuddin Hussein and Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno L.P. Marsudi, to discuss the situation in the South China Sea.

"As the year 2022 marks the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), all parties will take it as an opportunity to fully and effectively implement the DOC and accelerate consultations on the 'Code of Conduct in the South China Sea,'" Chinese Foreign Ministry [spokesperson Zhao Lijiang](#) told reporters about the Wang-Locsin meeting.

Zhao further noted all parties would work to implement the recently penned Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) free trade deal to jumpstart regional recovery in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to a Chinese [Foreign Ministry report](#), Locsin spoke of their "unbreakable friendship" that "should become the stabilizing factor of the world's geopolitical changes." He noted Manila is committed to furthering their relationship and thanked Beijing for its extensive aid in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic.

CoC Seen as Safeguarding Philippine Sovereignty

Back in Manila, the rhetoric is a bit tougher, but even politicians advocating a counterbalance to China have placed advancing the CoC at the top of their concerns.

Philippine Senator Risa Hontiveros, a member of the left-wing Akbayan party, said Tuesday ASEAN "should stand together against China's bullying."

"We should put our differences aside and work towards the common goal of opposing unfounded and over-ambitious Chinese territorial claims in the region," she said, according to [the Philippine Star](#), adding that "If ASEAN does not adopt a common stand on the South China Sea [code of conduct], we cannot safeguard our shared interests." The outlet quoted several other lawmakers with similar views.

In September 2020, Locsin said [he was "honor bound"](#) to push the CoC draft document forward to its third reading before Manila passed its leadership on the issue to Myanmar in 2021.

However, little progress has been recorded since.

Vietnamese Prime Minister [Nguyen Xuan Phuc mentioned](#) at the ASEAN summit in November that all member states "look forward to the early conclusion of the code of conduct, which is effective, substantive, and consistent with international law, particularly the" 1982 United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte also committed to fast-tracking the CoC at the summit.

However, while Washington postures as upholding international law and regularly cites UNCLOS in its deliberate flouting of Chinese maritime claims, it has remained opposed to the CoC being concluded directly between Beijing and the ASEAN states.

In October 2019, then-Assistant Secretary of State [David Stilwell told](#) a Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee that the US remained "skeptical of the PRC's sincerity to negotiate a meaningful Code of Conduct that reinforces international law," adding that if it benefits China's maritime claims it "would be harmful to the region."

Then in May 2020, the Council on Foreign Relations, an influential Washington, DC-based policy [think tank, proposed](#) that Washington foul the China-ASEAN negotiations, draw up a

separate code of conduct with ASEAN nations amenable to its interests, and impose it on China.

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Video: Evacuations Begin on Caribbean Island of St. Vincent Amid Imminent Volcano Eruption by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Vincentian authorities have ordered an evacuation ahead of an imminent eruption by St. Vincent's active volcano, La Soufriere, which has been effusively erupting but also formed a large lava dome.

Ralph Gonsalves, Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, declared a red alert on Thursday and ordered an evacuation of large parts of St. Vincent, the country's largest island ahead of an imminent explosive eruption.

St. Vincent's National Emergency Management Organization (NEMO) [warned on Twitter](#) on Thursday of a "substantial prospect of disaster" and quoting NEMO director Michelle Forbes as saying "be ready, get your things in order."

"Safe areas where people will be evacuated to are from North Union to Kingstown, on the Windward side of the island, Barrouallie to Kingstown on the Leeward side and the Grenadine Islands," NEMO said, noting that a Royal Caribbean cruise liner was on its way to the island to pick up refugees and that another smaller vessel had been immediately dispatched "to the leeward side of the island to move residents in the red zone who are in harm's way."

While La Soufriere has been effusing lava for months, a significant lava dome has built up in its crater that according to NEMO is so tall as to be above the lip of the caldera, visible and glowing against the darkness of night. Earthquakes earlier this week originating from the volcano also pointed to heightened tectonic activity.

Richard Robertson, lead geologist at the University of the West Indies Seismic Research Center on the island, [told reporters earlier](#) on Thursday the scientists expected "explosions at the volcano" within the next 24 to 48 hours.

UWI scientists have tracked the volcano's growing lava dome for weeks. A drone captured the smoking mass in late March:

UWI also [posted a video](#) from its camera positioned at the volcano's summit on Thursday.

In addition, one daring filmer captured the huge lava dome.

The volcano is St. Vincent's largest, towering more than 4,000 feet above the island. Its most recent eruption was in 1979.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines, located 100 miles west of Barbados, was part of the British Empire until 1979, when it gained its independence. Its population is just 110,000 people.

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## US Amphibious Assault Force Joins Carrier Roosevelt in South China Sea Amid Rising Tensions

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Although US shores are thousands of miles from the South China Sea, its spy planes have regularly combed the waters in recent years. It has also dispatched thousands of assault forces to conduct drills in the waterway, claiming itself to be the enforcer of the international rules-based order.

A second US aircraft carrier has entered the South China Sea amid rising tensions between the US and China. Several other warships have sailed perilously close to Chinese waters, including a destroyer on Wednesday that traversed the Taiwan Strait.

According to the South China Sea Probing Initiative ([SCSPI](#)) [think tank](#), the USS Makin Island entered the South China Sea on Wednesday via the Strait of Malacca, joining the USS Theodore Roosevelt, which made the same passage several days ago.

That same day, US Indo-Pacific Command tweeted photos of Makin crew members engaged in target practice with their M9 pistols with the caption “Sailors participate in a live-fire training exercise.” It’s unclear if the warship is engaged in other live-fire drills.

An amphibious assault ship with an aircraft carrier flight deck and several dozen vertical takeoff aircraft, USS Makin Island sailed from the Persian Gulf with two other smaller landing platform docks: USS Somerset and USS San Diego. Together, they can carry more than 3,000 US Marines and their amphibious assault equipment.

However, with Makin Island out of the Indian Ocean, there is no US capital ship in the region for the first time since early 2019, as the Trump administration stepped up its “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran after withdrawing from the 2015 nuclear deal. Instead, command over US Navy Task Force 50 is being exercised from the French aircraft carrier [Charles de Gaulle](#) in the Persian Gulf.

In the South China Sea, however, the two US capital ships arrive in the midst of a tense standoff between China and the Philippines, as the latter continues to lodge official complaints about the presence of several Chinese fishing boats near Whitsun Reef, whose ownership is disputed between the two nations. China claims the boats are sheltering from stormy weather, but Manila says they’re part of [Beijing’s maritime militia](#) and there to stake out a claim to the reef.

Western media [has made much](#) of the presence of Chinese aircraft in Taiwan’s air defense identification zone in recent days, portraying the incident [as an incursion](#) of the island’s territory and a threat. However, the ADIZ is little more than a region in which aircraft are asked to identify themselves and are tracked on radar, and holds no legal importance. Taiwan’s ADIZ extends a significant distance beyond the island’s waters and even covers part of the Chinese mainland. e self-declared Air Defense Identification Zones (ADIZ) of Taiwan, South Korea and Japan

In addition, one US destroyer has been cruising close to the Yangtze River delta and another, the USS John S. McCain, engaged in the deliberately provocative action of sailing through the Taiwan Strait [on Wednesday](#). China regards Taiwan as a province in rebellion, a position the US has formally endorsed as part of its normalization of relations with Beijing more than 40 years ago; however, in reality Washington remains the Taiwanese government’s largest backer.

On the other hand, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has moved its own carrier strike force, [including the Liaoning](#) and five other warships, into the South China Sea as

well, according to the [South China Morning Post](#). Accompanying Liaoning is the Type 055 cruiser Nanchang, the largest non-carrier warship in Asia.

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Fed Chair Warns of 'Different Economy' Post-Pandemic But Sees 'Brighter Outlook' Amid Reopenings  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While the US and other rich nations have acquired multiple times the number of COVID-19 vaccines they will need to inoculate their populations, economists and health officials are warning the global economy will continue to suffer so long as poorer nations continue to be left behind in the vaccination process.

US Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell warned leading economists and bankers on Thursday that while good things lay in store for the US economy as the COVID-19 pandemic draws to a close, the nation won't simply return to status quo ante coronavirus.

"There are a number of factors that are coming together to support a brighter outlook for the US economy," [Powell said Thursday](#) during the spring meetings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the two major pillars of Western-centered system of international monetary management born after World War II.

While he noted those factors put the US "on track to allow a full reopening of the economy fairly soon," he cautioned that "It's important to remember we're not going back to the same economy. This will be a different economy."

Indeed, while employers will be hiring again, they won't be hiring the same workers or looking to fill the same positions. Many businesses opted to switch to automation during the pandemic, which was accompanied by a dramatic recession and produced similar results. Tens of millions were thrown out of work, and while the US Bureau of [Labor Statistics reported](#) last week that 916,000 jobs were added in March and the official unemployment rate is just 6%, 43.4% of those unemployed are long-term unemployed, meaning they have been without work for more than 6 months.

On top of the 9.7 million unemployed persons in the US are another 6.9 million people who are not part of the labor force - meaning they're not counted as unemployed - but who want a job, according to the BLS report. In other words, the true unemployment rate isn't 6%, it's 10.3%. A February [Pew Research report](#) also found that two-thirds of unemployed people have considered changing careers.

"We think that there is a very real scenario in which a lot of the large employment, low-wage jobs in retail and in food service just go away in the coming years," Susan Lund, head of the McKinsey Global Institute, told [the Washington Post](#) in February. "It means that we're going to need a lot more short-term training and credentialing programs."

Uneven Vaccine Drive

While daily new cases of COVID-19 in the US are down considerably from their catastrophic winter highs, the real promise of reopening the economy is coming with vaccinations. US



President Joe Biden has [pledged to vaccinate](#) 200 million people with at least one shot by May 1 out of a US population of roughly 330 million.

According to data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([CDC](#)) [released on Thursday](#), the US had fully vaccinated 25.4% of its adult population and given at least one dose of a vaccine to 43.2%, with those numbers being 19% and 33.7%, respectively, for the entire population.

Meanwhile, World Trade Organization Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala noted Thursday, "If we don't do something to change the pace at which the poorer countries are getting access to vaccines, it will take a long time to get to herd immunity for the world." Just 0.1% of vaccines have gone to low-income countries, and the world's richest nations have bought up multiple times what their populations require for full immunization.

Nations of the Global South have primarily gotten their vaccines through the World Health Organization's [COVAX program](#), to which other nations donate supplies, or from [Russia](#) and [China](#). The two nations have signed deals with many nations in Africa, Asia and South America to provide vaccines, in some cases including building factories, like China will do in Egypt.

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Nearly 19,000 Unaccompanied Minors Stopped at US-Mexico Border in March Amid Booming Crisis

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Over the last several months, agents with the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) have documented a massive surge in attempted crossings at the US-Mexico border, with the number of cases increasing each month. Officials have indicated that the current border spike will be the most severe in over 20 years.

The number of migrants encountered at the US' southern border have continued to skyrocket, with officials taking into custody nearly 19,000 unaccompanied children during the month of March, a CBP report released on Thursday has revealed.

The agency noted in its release that Border Patrol encountered more than 172,000 individuals seeking entry along the US-Mexico border, underscoring that the March figures show a 71% increase from data released for the month of February.

Of the migrants, the CBP report states that the "majority of encounters on the Southwest border remains single adults," which have continued to be expelled under guidelines implemented by the Biden administration. In March, single adults accounted for 60% of border encounters, of which 28% represented individuals who had been previously denied entry.

An unidentified Biden administration official [who spoke to NPR](#) informed the outlet that "the levels of flows pose a challenge to Border Patrol, but the high level of recidivism means that we can't look at those flows as individual people."

"It's often the same people coming back through," the individual reiterated.

The report also highlighted that CBP agents have seen a massive spike in the number of unaccompanied minors who are arriving at entry ports. In March, agents reported approximately 18,890 children, marking a 100% increase from the month prior.

"Although less than 11% of encounters in March were unaccompanied children, they make up the largest demographic group of individuals in custody at CBP facilities," officials explained in the Thursday release.

While the report indicates that housing for minors has been expanded due to the border uptick, the Biden administration has encountered several setbacks on the matter, with max capacities and temporary stay limits being repeatedly exceeded by facilities attempting to meet demand. Concerns regarding child abuse have also emerged.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott called on the federal government on Wednesday to cease operations at the Freeman Coliseum, a concert and sports venue that has since been turned into a federally-run unaccompanied minor facility. Allegations surrounding the venue have suggested that children are being sexually abused and neglected.

During a Wednesday conference, Abbott ordered both the Texas Department of Public Safety and the Texas Rangers to investigate the allegations, which also claim that minors housed at the San Antonio venue are not being separated from children who have tested positive for COVID-19.

"The Biden administration opened the borders and failed to plan for the influx of unaccompanied children crossing the border, and now we are faced with our worst fears - allegations of child abuse and neglect," Abbott said in a [statement](#). "[US] President [Joe] Biden's disastrous decisions caused this crisis, and his administration must act now to protect these children, secure the border and end this crisis."

Abbott's move stands out as the first time that a state official has announced an investigation into an intake facility established by the US government.

The CBP report states that recent spikes in migration to the US-Mexico border have undergone an increase since at least April 2020 as a result of violence, food insecurity, poverty and several natural disasters which wrecked much of Central America with [back-to-back](#) hurricanes.

To date, the agency has reported over 569,800 encounters with US-bound migrants.

The latest findings came as US Vice President Kamala Harris has been tapped to serve as the [point person](#) for handling the Biden administration's response to the migrant crisis. Earlier reports state that Harris will follow a two-pronged effort to curb illegal crossings, one of which will work to address the root causes of migration.

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Tennessee Governor Signs Bill Allowing Most Adults to Carry Handguns Without Permit by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, US President Joe Biden announced a series of executive orders and called on congressional lawmakers to pave the way for comprehensive gun control measures in order to clamp down on the skyrocketing gun violence within the US.



Tennessee's Republican Gov. Bill Lee signed a new gun-related legislation on Thursday, allowing the majority of adults within the state to openly carry a handgun without having to present a valid firearm permit.

The new measure, which is [backed](#) by the National Rifle Association (NRA) and not applicable to long guns, will allow individuals 21 and older to freely carry a handgun, concealed or otherwise. For members of the US military, however, the age range for permitless gun carry drops down between 18 and 20.

While the law effectively removes misdemeanor offenses for individuals who have been charged with carrying a handgun without a permit, it also boosts punishments for other gun crimes. In fact, theft of a firearm went from a misdemeanor to a felony offense, and also mandates a six-month sentence behind bars.

The bill will not be applicable to felons, individuals convicted of domestic violence offenses or stalking, and persons who have been hit with a DUI conviction. Additionally, individuals who have been committed to a mental institution will not be eligible.

Following the official signing, Lee issued a statement via social media, writing, "I signed constitutional carry today because it shouldn't be hard for law-abiding Tennesseans to exercise their [Second Amendment] rights."

The legislation has been met with strong objection by state lawmakers and community officials who have grown concerned that the bill's passage will both increase crime and expose law enforcement officials to unnecessary dangers.

At present, law enforcement organizations such as the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation (TBI), the Tennessee Sheriffs' Association and the Tennessee Association of Chiefs of Police are all against the measure.

TBI Senior Policy Adviser Jimmy Musice [previously](#) told lawmakers while testifying against the bill that the existing permit process has allowed officials to weed out thousands of ineligible gun buyers.

"We don't have any issue, and support the underlying policy that those that are legally permissible to carry possess a firearm and defend themselves," Musice said. "The permit process allows us to actually do that by knowing if that person truly is lawful."

Despite the response from the state's leading gun enforcement groups, Lee has remained adamant that the new bill will strengthen laws that would "help prevent gun crimes in the future." The legislation is due to take effect on July 1, and will mark the Volunteer State as the 19th US state to allow permitless gun carry. Other states with similar legislation include South Dakota, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Vermont and Wyoming.

The Tennessee bill comes weeks after a pair of mass shootings in [Georgia](#) and [Colorado](#) shook the nation, and just hours after the president announced a [series](#) of new efforts to curb gun violence in the US.

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Ex-NFL Player Reportedly Killed Five People in South Carolina Before Committing Suicide  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

South Carolina's York County Sheriff's Office announced on Wednesday that three adults and two children were killed during a home shooting in Rock Hill. The suspect has since been identified as Phillip Adams, a former National Football League (NFL) player who suffered multiple injuries, including concussions, during his short-lived career.

The York County Sheriff's Office in South Carolina held a news conference Thursday afternoon to provide updates on their investigation into the Wednesday mass shooting that killed a doctor, his wife, their two grandchildren and a heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) technician.

Sheriff Kevin Tolson detailed that authorities obtained a search warrant for the home of Alonzo Adams, Phillip Adams' father, after "evidence from the scene" in Rock Hill linked the NFL player to the crime.

Officers were then dispatched to the home, which was located "just down the road" from the scene of the crime, according to Tolson. The sheriff claimed responding authorities cleared others out of the home and attempted to have a conversation with 33-year-old via loudspeaker. However, when officers entered the room, they found Adams dead, with a single gunshot wound to the head.

"We did not hear any gunshots," Tolson said.

The sheriff also asserted there was no indication that there was a doctor-patient relationship between the two, despite earlier reports stating otherwise.

"There's nothing about this right now that makes sense to any of us," Tolson concluded.

The murder victims have been identified as: 70-year-old Dr. [Robert Leslie](#); 69-year-old Barbara Leslie; 9-year-old Adah Lesslie; 5-year-old Noah Lesslie and 39-year-old James Lewis.

Another HVAC technician was shot and taken to the hospital Wednesday and, as of Thursday afternoon, remains in critical condition.

Both a .45 caliber handgun and 9mm handgun were used in the deadly incident. There is currently no indication the weapons were illegally obtained, according to the York Sheriff's Office.

Alonzo Adams, told Charlotte outlet [WCNC-TV](#) that he believes his son's NFL-related injuries may have played in his changed behavior.

"I can say he's a good kid — he was a good kid, and I think the football messed him up," he said. "He didn't talk much and he didn't bother nobody."

It's currently unclear if Adams, who suffered multiple concussions during his NFL career, suffered from chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, as the brain degeneration can only be identified after one is dead.

During the news conference, Sheriff Kevin Tolson described Dr. Lesslie as a "pillar of the community" and someone very well-known in the area.

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Art Group Behind Lil Nas X's 'Satan Shoes' Reaches Settlement With Nike, Issues Recall  
by [Evan Craighead](#)



Last month, MSCHF Product Studio, Inc., was hit with a swift lawsuit from Nike over the release of its "Satan Shoes," featuring recording artist Lil Nas X. "We do not have a relationship with Little Nas X or MSCHF. Nike did not design or release these shoes, and we do not endorse them," the company announced a day before the court filing.

In a Thursday evening statement, Nike confirmed reports that it reached a settlement with New York-based art collective MSCHF regarding its decision to alter 666 pairs of Nike Air Max 97 for its "Satan Shoe" rollout and promotion of Lil Nas X's music.

"MSCHF also previously released Jesus Shoes, which used a Nike Air Max 97 as the base. In both cases, MSCHF altered these shoes without Nike's authorization. Nike had nothing to do with the Satan Shoes or the Jesus Shoes," the company expressed.

"Today, April 8th, Nike and MSCHF have agreed to settle the lawsuit."

Per the settlement, MSCHF has agreed to launch a "voluntary recall" for those who purchased either shoes.

"If any purchasers were confused, or if they otherwise want to return their shoes, they may do so," the statement read. "Purchasers who choose not to return their shoes and later encounter a product issue, defect, or health concern should contact MSCHF, not Nike."

The mention of possible health concerns likely relates to the fact that the sole of the "Satan Shoes" contains ink and one drop of human blood

Those seeking to return their shoes will be refunded the "original retail prices."

"The parties are pleased to put this dispute behind them," Nike's statement concluded, without further details of the settlement.

David H. Bernstein, counsel for the art collective, also issued a news release on the matter, claiming that while MSCHF planned to use the "First Amendment rights of artistic expression" to defend its "Satan Shoe" release, the collective "recognized that settlement was the best way to allow it to put this lawsuit behind."

MSCHF now plans to "dedicate its time to new artistic and expressive projects," Bernstein said. While Nike has settled one case, another legal battle may be gearing up over its own controversial release of its "Nike Air Force 1 USPS."

In an April 1 statement, the US Postal Service (USPS) highlighted that the company did not seek authorization or licensing from the postal service.

"This is an unfortunate situation where a large brand such as Nike, which aggressively protects its own intellectual property, has chosen to leverage another brand for its own gain," the USPS said, adding it will "take whatever actions it deems necessary to protect its valuable IP rights."

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Off-Duty Pentagon Officer Kills 2 People for Allegedly Breaking Into Vehicle  
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

In late March, a similar incident involving an off-duty officer with the Pentagon Force Protection Agency (PFPA) unfolded in Washington, DC, after a 16-year-old boy had allegedly attempted to

rob the official. The teen was shot in the arm and was subsequently charged with assault with the intent to commit robbery while armed with a BB gun.

An off-duty officer with the Pentagon Force Protection Agency has been placed on administrative leave after he shot and killed two people who he believed to be breaking into a car.

The deadly incident unfolded during the predawn hours on Wednesday in the parking lot area of the Takoma Overlook Condominiums in Takoma Park, Maryland. Officers from the Takoma Park Police Department responded to the scene at approximately 5:03 a.m. local time after dispatch received reports of multiple shots fired.

Citing dispatch audio acquired from Alertpage/OpenMHz, [WJLA reported](#) that an individual who dialed 911 claimed to have heard someone yelling "Get down! Get down!" moments before shots rang out. The officer, who has not yet been named, said he engaged the suspects after they failed to follow his direction.

A statement released by the Takoma Park Police Department details that the officer alleged the suspects attempted to flee in a vehicle, at which time he discharged his department-issued firearm.

[Reports state](#) that PFPA officers are bound by a 2008 use-of-force regulation, which says that officers may fire at moving vehicles "when an employee has a reasonable basis to believe that the vehicle poses an immediate threat of death or serious bodily harm to the employee or others."

Suffering from gunshot wounds, the two suspects, identified as 32-year-old Dominique Williams of Hyattsville and 38-year-old James Lionel Johnson of District Heights, managed to drive themselves to the Prince George's Hospital (PGH). They both later succumbed to their injuries. The Montgomery County State's Attorney's Office has said they are currently gathering evidence and are working with the Takoma Police Department to investigate the incident.

In a statement given to WUSA9, a spokesperson for the US Department of Defense confirmed that the officer involved in the fatal altercation has been employed with the Pentagon Force Protection Agency since July 2019.

Officials also noted that the official had previously served as a federal police officer between 2009 and 2019, as well as a US Army military policeman and a US Air Force combat crewman. Additionally, the Pentagon official confirmed that the unidentified officer is "current on all use of force and firearms qualifications."

This incident unfolded just a day before US President Joe Biden [announced](#) to Congress a series of executive orders and demands for legislative action to address the epidemic of gun violence in the United States.

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'If You Love Us, Pay Us!': Sean Combs Bashes Corporate America for Failing to Invest in Black Media

by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)



US companies pledged tens of billions of dollars toward racial equity efforts in 2020. Earlier this month, General Motors Co. (GM) pledged to spend more advertising money on black-owned media companies amid growing pressure for corporate America to diversify the outlets where they advertise.

Sean “Diddy” Combs, the rapper, producer, and entrepreneur, called out GM and corporate America in a Thursday [open letter](#) over their lack of investment in Black communities and argued that the Black community is prepared to “weaponize our dollars.”

Diddy accused GM of making billions of dollars from the Black community every year, while other Black-owned media companies, including his own music cable network REVOLT, have repeatedly been forced to fight for “crumbs.”

“Corporations like General Motors have exploited our culture, undermined our power, and excluded Black entrepreneurs from participating in the value created by Black consumers,” he argued, demanding that corporate America reinvest an equitable percentage of “what you take from our community” and put it back into the community.

“If you love us, pay us!” Combs pleaded.

In his letter, the musician emphasizes this point, citing that it is disrespectful to see the black community spend over \$1 trillion annually while remaining the most “economically undervalued and underserved at every level.”

Diddy concluded his letter by stating that “radical change is the only option. You’re either with us or you are on the other side.” Statements like this have been reflected in recent actions taken by black-owned enterprises around the US.

Late last month, several leaders of major black-owned media companies, including rapper Ice Cube, signed a [full-page ad](#) in Sunday’s Detroit Free Press that accused GM CEO Marry Barra of being racist for refusing to meet with them to discuss ways in which they could resolve the issues of systemic racism, and build a partnership between GM and black consumers.

GM, however, later gave into demands and vowed to spend more advertisement funds on black-owned companies after Byron Allen, of the Allen Media Group, demanded in an interview with the Detroit Free Press that the company allocate at least 5% of its ad budget to black-owned media companies.

The rise in so-called racial equity efforts seems to have been a result of the rising national debate about systemic racism following the killing of Minnesota resident George Floyd at the hands of a white police officer. The aftermath of this killing found Black Lives Matter and Black Businesses Matter a trending sensation on [social media](#) networks.

Combs believes that exposing GM’s historic refusal to invest in black-owned media is not an “assassination of character,” but instead an opportunity to expose the way GM and other advertisers have treated the black community.

“No longer can corporate America manipulate our community into believing that incremental progress is acceptable action,” Combs wrote.

Does Hypocrisy Have a Place in Black Business?

Many have responded to Diddy’s letter in both a positive and negative light, with one critic calling the letter “tone-deaf.” Many seem to believe that corporate America does owe the black community, but it does not appear that many want the former to be the messenger in this battle. Last year, Diddy was [called](#) out by Mason Betha, also known as Harlem rapper Ma\$e, after Combs threatened to boycott the 62nd annual Grammy Awards for not “respecting hip-hop.”

Diddy, who is a three-time Grammy winner and the founder of the Bad Boy Records, blasted the Academy for "how they treat black musicians and hip-hop artists."

Betha subsequently lashed out at Combs for ripping off his own Bad Boy artists, accusing the entrepreneur of underpaying him for song publishing early on in his own music career.

[Others](#) have taken to Twitter in order to call out the rapper, with one commenting "you've been manipulating black artists for decades," while others believe that when it comes to being respected by corporate America the biggest battle "starts with us."

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'The Rise of Aten': Egypt Unearths 3,000-Year-Old 'Lost Golden City' in Luxor  
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

In Luxor, Egypt's Valley of the Kings in 1922, archaeologists unearthed the tomb of Tutankhamun, the boy king more widely known as King Tut. At the time, it was described as the biggest archaeological discovery in history, but was referred to by Howard Carter's excavation team as the unleashing of the "Pharaoh's curse."

Once again, Luxor is the center of archaeological discovery after Egypt's Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities announced on Thursday the discovery of what it has been dubbed the "Lost Golden City."

After seven months of excavation, a mission led by Dr. Zahi Hawass, Egypt's former antiquities chief, unearthed "several areas or neighborhoods" excavators believe to be a part of a 3,000-year-old city.

Jewelry such as rings have been discovered at the dig site, along with pottery vessels, scarab beetle amulets and mud bricks bearing seals of Amenhotep III which prove that the city dates back to the era of the 18th dynasty king, who ruled Egypt from 1291 to 1353.

The city was co-ruled with Amenhotep III's son Akhenaten who eventually abandoned the city after assuming the throne. Hawass, a world-renowned archaeologist who has been entangled with [corruption allegations](#), calls the latest discovery "the Rise of Aten."

A [statement](#) released by Egypt's Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities indicates that the excavation area "was the largest administrative and industrial settlement in the era of the Egyptian empire on the western bank of Luxor."

According to the Thursday post, the southern part of the city is said to have a bakery, ovens and storage pottery, while the northern part comprises administrative and residential districts that include houses with walls measuring up to three metres high.

"What they unearthed was the site of a large city in a good condition of preservation, with almost complete walls, and with rooms filled with tools of daily life," the ministry's release states.

Betsy Bryan, a professor of Egyptian art and archaeology at Johns Hopkins University, told [ABC News](#) the find was the second-most important archaeological discovery since the tomb of Tutankhamen.



[Last week](#), the mummy of Amenhotep III, his wife Queen Tiye and 20 others were transported across Cairo from the Egyptian Museum to the new National Museum of Egyptian Civilization in a procession called the "Pharaohs' Golden Parade."

#### The Curse of King Tut's Tomb

In an attempt to bring tourism back to the African country, Egypt has faced a slew of bad luck that some have chalked up to the "Pharaoh's Curse," an alleged hex that links back to an inscription found on Tutankhamun's tomb. The [engraving states](#) that "death shall come on swift wings to him that toucheth the tomb of the pharaoh."

Of course, this is just speculation. Hawass previously told [ABC News](#) that "the curse is a myth, and the inscription they speak about is non-existent."

However, what is real are the series of unfortunate events that Egypt has recently experienced: a [Suez Canal blockage](#) which disturbed the global markets for almost a week; two [train collisions](#); a [garment factory](#) fire; and a residential [building collapse](#), all which came closely after Egypt's announcement of their Golden Parade.

Whether one believes in curses or not there is an [ongoing debate](#) over archaeological discoveries that often result in the permanent untombing of most sacred burial sites. In the statement from Egypt's Antiquities Ministry, it confirms that those involved in the mission of unearthing the Golden City say they wish to continue their work to "uncover untouched tombs filled with treasures."

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RPT: ANALYSIS - Pence Launched Group to Steady Republican Party, Likely Prepare for Trump 2024 Run

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - Former US Vice President Mike Pence announced the creation of his new political advocacy group in order to position himself to run again as former President Donald Trump's running mate in 2024, political analysts told Sputnik.

Pence announced on Wednesday a new advocacy organization, Advancing American Freedom, that he said would promote the conservative policies of the Trump administration. The release contained a list of over two dozen prominent conservatives on the organization's advisory board, including many who served during the past four years.

However, Pence faces a number of challenges that make the prospects for success uncertain not least of which are the divisions in the Republican party, numerous lawsuits against Trump and the fact that a number of Trump supporters view Pence as having betrayed former president.

#### UNSETTLED REPUBLICANS

Historian and political analyst Dan Lazare said on Thursday that Pence's move reflected the unsettled state of the Republican party at present. He said it was an early move in the years of political maneuvering now starting to prepare for Trump's political comeback attempt in 2024.

"I assume it means that things are extremely unsettled inside the GOP and that the major players figure it's time to begin positioning themselves for what everyone assumes will be a Trump candidacy in 2024," Lazare said.

Pence's goal was clearly to build an independent power base that would enable him to bargain with Trump from a position of strength, Lazare explained.

"That doesn't mean he'll be able to influence policy since we all know that the Orange One does not take kindly to political advice. But it could enable him to convince Trump that he needs him on board once again as his running mate," he said.

If Pence succeeds in serving another four-year term as vice president after participating in a 2024 Trump reelection victory, he would have a strong base from which to run for the presidency himself in 2028, Lazare continued.

"What Pence may really be positioning himself for is a presidential bid in 2028, when he'll be only 69, or even in 2032," he said.

However, this anticipated outcome was still very tentative and uncertain, Lazare cautioned.

#### LITIGATION AGAINST TRUMP POTENTIALLY CRIPPLING

A lot can happen over the next three years that may cripple the chances for success, including numerous lawsuits against the former president, Lazare said.

"Trump is facing a tidal wave of litigation that could prove crippling. He also faces the problem of how to keep himself in the news so as to remain fresh and relevant," he said.

Trump and Pence could have serious comeback prospects if current President Joe Biden and his administration fail, but they could look like the forgotten and discarded past if Biden instead succeeded, Lazare argued.

A Trump-Pence comeback "will not be difficult if Biden blunders badly in the next few months and falls flat on his face, which I think he will. But if he emerges as the next Franklin Roosevelt, which I guess is also possible, then Trump will wind up looking like a tired old retread," he said.

Pence was taking advantage of the current relatively quiet season in domestic US politics after years of upheaval to try and position himself, Lazare observed.

"Politics are in a lull for the moment, but we'll know more as soon as they start heating up, which I'm sure they will shortly," he said.

#### PENCE POSITIONS HIMSELF AS CHAMPION OF TRUMP'S AGENDA

Independent Institute Center on Peace and Freedom Director Ivan Eland agreed that Pence was trying to position himself as a leading champion of Trump's nationalist agenda to prepare for a political comeback with his new advocacy group.

"Like the other Trump-world groups, it is to fund raise and keep the Trump agenda alive among the base. [Pence] will need to cater to the Trump base but be somewhat independent of it, because many in the base hate him for not trying to overturn the election on Trump's behalf," Eland said.

However, for all his efforts and experience, Pence still lacked the crucial popularity and type of personality to make a serious bid for the presidency, Eland maintained.

Pence's prospects for winning the 2024 Republican presidential nomination remained "fairly low because of the aforementioned hatred by some in the base and because his charisma is nonexistent," he said.

Pence's new group includes former White House aides Kellyanne Conway and Larry Kudlow and President Ronald Reagan's attorney general Ed Meese, the release said.



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**RPT - Ex-US Border Official Expects Biden-Spurred Immigration Crisis to Get Even Worse**

RIO GRANDE VALLEY/REYNOSA, April 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden by reversing his predecessor's strong immigration policies has fueled a record-pace influx of migrants at the US southern border, a crisis which is likely to get even worse in the coming months, former Customs and Border Protection (CBP) sector chief Victor Manjarrez told Sputnik.

On Thursday, CPB data revealed that US border apprehensions soared by more than 70 percent in March. The 172,331 migrant encounters recorded represents the highest monthly total in more than two decades, with the Biden administration on pace to top the previous annual record set in 2019 of over 977,000 apprehensions. The president and other administration officials have said the surge is seasonal.

"It's the perception. If you looked at the perception between this administration and the previous administration, one is be tough on border security and that there was consequences," Manjarrez said. "This one [Biden], in essence, almost all the consequences have been taken away. Once those were not utilized, taken away as a tool, what consequence is left now for someone crossing?"

Biden shortly after taking office terminated many of Trump's immigration measures including construction of a wall along the 2,000-mile border with Mexico. The Trump administration was able to construct 400 miles of large steel wall structure despite lengthy court battles and opposition from Congress.

Manjarrez, who served as a CBP sector chief in El Paso, Texas, and Tucson, Arizona, said the surge of migrants coming to the United States is expected to worsen if the Biden administration does not impose a deterrent.

"It's going to be a bigger mess because the numbers are growing... the number is going to continue to increase, it's not going to go down because there is no such thing as seasonal anymore," Manjarrez said. "The seasonal trends haven't occurred in over two decades." Moreover, he said, the actual number of migrants coming into the United States illegally is higher than the CBP numbers.

Part of the problem, Manjarrez explained, is that mass illegal migration overwhelms CBP resources and collapses operations.

"It's just simply hard to keep up... Our concerns become what's being missed, that's the scary part," Manjarrez said. "Criminal elements do exploit that because the Border Patrol resources are vulnerable to exploitation. It's like any law enforcement entity, there's no way you can be everywhere all the time."

The former sector chief said what ended up getting lost is that the border wall was a "tool."

"What that tool does is it reduces the types of people that cross that area. What you saw in those gaps were probably family units. More than likely you're not going to have a family unit that is going to go over a barrier," he said.

The border wall "turns seconds into minutes," buying law enforcement time to respond to illegal entries into the United States, Manjarrez said.

"A barrier is worth its weight in gold in the urban and rural area," Manjarrez said.

Although Biden kept Trump's policy to expel undocumented migrants with COVID-19 symptoms, undocumented migrant children who arrive at the border without a legal guardian are exempt from the rule, which has contributed to a record number of them being held in US facilities.

According to data released by CPB on Wednesday, the US has more than 20,000 unaccompanied migrant children in federal custody, an increase of over 2,000 from the previous week.

Manjarrez said the humanitarian aspect of the immigration crisis is "turning out to be a mess."

"You're starting to see kids dropped off in dangerous places," Manjarrez said. "That didn't happen before."

Manjarrez attributed such phenomena to Biden's change in policy and the president's idea that the border is "open."

Manjarrez said smugglers have raised their prices - a Mexican national is paying about \$6,000 to \$7,000 to cross illegally in the El Paso-Juarez border region. Migrants from Northern Triangle countries - Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador - are paying about \$10,000 per person, he said.

Addressing the root causes of migration from the Northern Triangle countries is welcomed but deterring the influx requires a combination of long-term and short-term solutions, he added.

Biden said he reversed Trump's immigration policies because they were unwarranted, inhumane and inconsistent with America's values. The president and other officials have also said surges tend to respond to "hope" of more humane policies under a new administration.

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#### **UPDATE 2 - Texas Business Shooting Leaves 1 Dead, State Trooper Wounded**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - A gunman shot five people, killing one, at a local business in Bryan, Texas, Bryan Police Department Chief Eric Buske said in a press conference.

"Four people were transported to St. Joseph hospital in critical condition with gunshot injuries... one person was deceased at the scene," Buske said on Thursday.

Texas Department of Public Safety spokesperson Craig Cummings said one state trooper was shot while attempting to arrest the suspect. The trooper is in stable condition, he added.

The police chief said they may have the suspect in custody, noting that it appears he was an employee at the business. The motive for the shooting is still under investigation, he added.

Buske said he could not confirm if all the victims were employees at the local business.

The FBI has offered to help in the investigation, Buske said.

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#### **COVID-19 Kills Native Americans at Nearly 4 Times Rate of Whites - Report**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - Native Americans in the US state of Montana died from COVID-19 at rates nearly four times the rate of whites, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said in a report.

"During March 13 - November 30, 2020, COVID-19 incidence and mortality among AI/AN [Native American] persons in Montana were approximately twice and nearly four times those among White persons, respectively. In addition, the case-fatality rate among AI/AN persons was close to twice that among White persons," the report said on Thursday.

Mortality was calculated by examining death certificates that cited COVID-19 as either an underlying or contributing cause of death while the case fatality rate was limited to laboratory confirmed COVID-19 cases, the report said.

The estimated cumulative COVID-19 incidence among AI/AN [Native American] persons (9,064 cases per 100,000) was 2.2 times that among White persons (4,033 cases per 100,000). During the same period, the cumulative COVID-19 mortality rate among AI/AN persons (267 deaths per 100,000) was 3.8 times that among White persons (71 deaths per 100,000), the report added.

The findings reinforce importance of using state-level surveillance to develop state and tribal COVID-19 vaccine allocation strategies and devise culturally appropriate public health measures that might help reduce COVID-19 incidence and mortality in Native American communities, according to the report.

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#### **Police Chief Confirms 5 People Shot, 1 Dead in Texas Local Business Incident**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - A gunman shot five people, killing one, at a local business in Bryan, Texas, Bryan Police Department Chief Eric Buske said in a press conference.

"Four people were transported to St. Joseph hospital in critical condition with gunshot injuries...one person was deceased at the scene," Buske said on Thursday.

The police chief said they may have the suspect in custody, noting that it appears he was an employee at the business. The motive for the shooting is still under investigation, he added. Buske said he could not confirm if all the victims were employees at the local business.

The FBI has offered to help in the investigation, Buske said.

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Pentagon Chief to Discuss Russian, Chinese Threats at NATO HQ Next Week - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin plans to discuss countering Russia and China during talks at NATO headquarters on an overseas trip that begins on Saturday, the Department of Defense said in a statement.

"Secretary Austin will next travel to Belgium, to meet with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on how the Alliance is tackling destabilizing behavior by Russia, a rising China, terrorism, and global challenges such as COVID-19 and climate change," the release said on Thursday.

Austin will also visit the UK, Germany and Israel during his trip.

"Secretary Austin will meet with his counterparts and other senior officials to discuss the importance of international defense relationships, and reinforce the United States' commitment to deterrence and defense, burden sharing, and enduring trans-Atlantic security," the Pentagon said.

In Israel Austin will meet with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Benjamin Gantz. He plans to reaffirm US commitment to the strategic partnership with Israel and its qualitative military edge.

In Germany, Austin will discuss with Minister of Defense Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer and Chancellery Foreign and Security Policy Adviser Jan Hecker bilateral defense relationship, combating "the malign influence of... shared strategic rivals" and US force posture in Germany and elsewhere.

"The Secretary will also visit US European Command and US Africa Command headquarters in Germany to meet with US troops and senior commanders and highlight his vision for security interests in the region," according to the statement.

The trip will conclude with travel to the United Kingdom for a meeting with Secretary of State for Defense Ben Wallace. Austin will reaffirm the importance of US-UK defense cooperation to meet global security challenges.

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Pentagon Chief to Discuss Russian, Chinese Threats During Overseas Trip - Statement

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**Police Chief Confirms 5 People Shot, 1 Dead in Texas Incident at Local Business**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - A gunman shot six people, killing one, at a local business in Bryan, Texas, Bryan Police Department Chief Eric Buske said in a press conference.

"Four people were transported to St. Joe hospital in critical condition with gunshot injuries...one person was deceased at the scene," Buske said on Thursday.

The police chief said they may have the suspect in custody, noting that it appears he was an employee at the business. The motive for the shooting is still under investigation, he added.

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**Americans' Emphasis on Environment Over Economy Shrinks During Pandemic - Poll**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - Americans continue to believe environmental protection is more important than economic growth by an 8 point margin, although the gap narrowed significantly during the coronavirus pandemic, a Gallup poll said.

"While slightly more US adults today prioritize the environment over economic growth, the 50 percent doing so is down from 60 percent in early 2020 (largely before the pandemic was declared) and 65 percent in 2019, and is the lowest recorded since 2015, when 46 percent held this view," a press release explaining the poll said on Thursday.

In the latest poll, 50 percent said the environment should be the greater priority compared with 42 percent who said economic growth should take precedence, the release said.

Gallup began asking the question between 1985 and 2000, and since 2001 has measured it each March as part of its annual environment poll.

The elevated unemployment rate during the pandemic - 6 percent in March - appears to be the biggest factor determining the size of the gap, the release said.

After declining for nearly a decade along with shrinking unemployment, the percentage of Americans citing the economy increased this year, reflecting the higher rate of unemployment today compared with just before the pandemic in 2020, according to the release.

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**Russia Pays \$86.5M In Toward UN 2021 Budget - Mission to UN**



UNITED NATIONS, April 8 (Sputnik) - Russia has paid its annual dues amounting to \$86.5 million toward the budget of the United Nations for this year, the Russian Permanent Mission to the organization said in a statement.

"On April 8, 2021, the Russian Federation transferred the amount of 86,464,886 US dollars to the United Nations accounts as payments of Russia's assessed contributions to the United Nations Regular Budget," the statement said.

According to the statement, part of the resources went toward the budget of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan and the the world body's Support Office in Somalia.

UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric thanked Russia for meeting its financial obligations.

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**Gunman in Texas Shooting at Local Business Still At Large - Police**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The gunman involved in a shooting at a local business in the Texas city of Bryan is still at large, Bryan Police Department Officer Lt. Jason James said in a press conference.

"We received a call of a shooting here at 350 Stone City Drive. Officers responded, they found several victims. They're checking the area, checking the building for more victims. Right now the subject is at large," James said on Thursday.

James did not reveal how many people were shot or if there are any deaths.

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**SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) -

**SITUATION IN UKRAINE**

\* The United States is considering sending warships to the Black Sea in the next several weeks in a show of support for Ukraine and as a warning to Russia, US media reported on Thursday.

\* A combined blast trauma and fragmentation injuries caused the death of a four-year-old boy in the vicinity of Donetsk, UN Human Rights Office spokesperson Liz Throssell told Sputnik.

\* Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visited military positions in Donbas with highest number of ceasefire violations and spoke with soldiers, his press office said.

\* Russia has no intention to infringe on Ukraine's sovereignty or seize any territories, and is interested in a stable situation in the neighboring country, Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff Dmitry Kozak said.

**PUTIN-MERKEL TALKS**

\* Russian President Vladimir Putin and German Chancellor Angela Merkel discussed the situation with Russia's jailed opposition figure Alexey Navalny in their phone conversation, the Kremlin said on Thursday.

\* Putin and Merkel discussed the situation in Donbas as well as the activities of foreign media outlets and non-governmental organizations in both countries, the Kremlin said.

\* Putin and Merkel welcomed the formation of central authorities in Libya for the transition period, and also exchanged opinions on the developments in Syria, the Kremlin said.

#### NORD STREAM 2

\* If Washington's new special representative aims to put an end to the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline for carrying Russian gas to Europe, then negotiations are doomed to failure, Klaus Ernst, the head of the German parliamentary economy and energy committee, told Sputnik on Thursday.

\* Negotiations between the European Union and the United States on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project are always welcome, but they should focus on the lifting of the US sanctions, Ernst told Sputnik.

\* The appointment of a special envoy by the United States for the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project would be considered as interference into affairs of other countries as Washington has nothing to do with the this issue, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

#### US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

\* Russia is ready for the worst developments in its relations with the United States, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.

\* Russia is ready for the worst developments in its relations with the United States, Peskov said.

\* The United States is artificially holding back cooperation with Russia in fields of economy and science, and this is bad, Peskov said.

#### BIDEN INITIATIVE ON GUN VIOLENCE

\* US President Joe Biden called on Congress on Thursday to eliminate legal immunity for gun manufacturers when their products are involved in mass shootings.

\* Biden will announce more anti-gun violence executive actions on top of the initial wave unveiled earlier in the day, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.

#### PUTIN-ALIEV TALKS

\* Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Azerbaijani counterpart, Ilham Aliyev, discussed the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh during a phone conversation on Thursday, taking into account recent Moscow-Yerevan talks on the issue, the Kremlin said.

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Active Shooter Situation in Texas Leaves at Least 7 People Injured - Police



WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - A gunman in Bryan, Texas, has shot at least seven people at a local business there, law enforcement said in an alert on Thursday.

"Multiple patient shooting. At least 7 people shot. 501 Industrial Blvd, Bryan, TX," the alert said.

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**US Physician Indicted Over \$300k COVID-19 Relief Program Fraud - Justice Dept.**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - Colorado physician Francis Joseph has been charged with a fraud to obtain nearly \$300,000 from three COVID-19 relief programs and faces up to 45 years in prison, the US Justice Department said in a release on Thursday.

"An indictment was unsealed Wednesday in Denver charging a Colorado man with stealing nearly \$300,000 in government funds from three different COVID relief programs and with making false statements in connection with bankruptcy proceedings," the release said. "Joseph is charged with theft in connection with health care, theft of government property, wire fraud, and making a false statement in connection with a bankruptcy proceeding."

Joseph has received and directed to his personal bank account approximately \$118,000 from the Accelerated and Advance Payment Program and the Provider Relief Fund as well as \$179,999 from the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), the release explained.

In addition, Joseph filed for bankruptcy on behalf of the clinic following his termination and submitted false statements about his misappropriation of funds from the clinic in connection with that proceeding, the release added.

Joseph faces up to ten years in prison for each theft count, 20 years for wire fraud and five years for the bankruptcy proceeding false statement, according to the release.

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**UPDATE - US Invests in Development of Biofuels for Aircraft, Ships - Energy Secretary**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States is investing in the development of aircraft and ship biofuels as well as in the reduction of methane emissions in the fossil fuel industry, Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said in a briefing on Thursday.

"Today, we are announcing another two funding opportunities for clean energy technology. One of them is to create next generation bio-fuels for airplanes and ships which are very hard to electrify, and the second is to announce clean energy technology funding opportunity to reduce methane emissions from the coal, oil, and gas industry," Granholm said.

According to the Energy Department press release published today, the amount of funding for the initiative is \$61.4 million and will help accelerate the US on its way to zero carbon emissions by 2050.

Aircraft and ships are very difficult to electrify and therefore require a doubling down on research and development to accomplish that, Granholm added as cited by the release.

In another release today, the Energy Department announced up to \$35 million funding for a new program that will focus on technologies to reduce methane emissions in the oil, gas, and coal industries to cut methane accumulation in the atmosphere and mitigate the effects of climate change.

Biofuels are produced by converting recently-living organic materials like crop waste, food waste, and algae into a liquid fuel, which can serve as a low-carbon equivalent to fossil-based fuels such as gasoline, jet, and diesel fuel, the release said.

President Joe Biden's Jobs Plan he announced in March envisions significant investments into the US infrastructure with green energy technologies being among the top priorities.

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**Blinken Calls Jordan's Abdullah II to Express Support Amid Royal Feud**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a phone conversation with Jordan's King Abdullah II on Thursday reiterated the United States' support for the monarch amid the recent feud within the royal family, the State Department's spokesperson Ned Price said.

"The Secretary reaffirmed the US commitment to its strategic partnership with Jordan and commended King Abdullah II for Jordan's steadfast leadership promoting peace and stability in the Middle East," Price said.

The spokesperson added that the United States deeply values "the strong bilateral cooperation and longtime friendship" with Jordan.

On Wednesday, US President Joe Biden called Abdullah II "to underscore the importance of his leadership to the United States and the region."

Abdullah II acknowledged "painful days" in his first public speech since the security allegations against former crown prince Hamzah bin Al-Hussein.

On Sunday, the prince said he was under house arrest, a day after state media reported he was told to stop actions that undermined national stability, as part of a broader security probe. The royal court published a letter two days latter, allegedly penned by Prince Hamzah, in which the estranged royalty pledged to always be of help to the king and the new crown prince.

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**Pentagon Says It Has No Comment on Media Reports Over Sending Warships to Black Sea**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon on Thursday said it has no comment on media reports that the United States is considering sending US warships to the Black Sea.

"We have nothing for you on this," the Pentagon spokesperson told Sputnik when asked to confirm the reports.



CNN earlier on Thursday said the US was considering sending warships to the Black Sea in the next several weeks in a show of support for Ukraine and as a warning to Russia.

The US Navy routinely operates in the Black Sea, but a deployment of warships now would send a specific message to Russia that the United States is closely watching rising tensions along eastern Ukraine's borders, the report cited an unnamed US defense official as saying.

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#### Florida Sues Biden Administration Over Continued Lockdown of Cruise Industry

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - Florida sued the Biden administration and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) over a continued coronavirus closure of the cruise industry amid growing numbers of vaccinated Americans, state Attorney General Ashley Moody said on Thursday.

"As COVID-19 vaccine distribution continues to increase at a rapid pace... airlines, hotels, restaurants, theme parks and other tourism industries are now open with reasonable safety measures," Moody said in a press release. "Yet, the cruise industry remains under a strict federal shutdown order - harming the national economy and Florida's travel industry along with its workers."

The complaint asks a federal court in Florida to set aside the CDC's actions and compel it to allow cruises to operate with the reasonable safety protocols that have been successful in other countries that now operate cruises.

Absent court intervention, Florida will lose hundreds of millions of dollars, if not billions. More importantly, the approximately 159,000 hard-working Floridians whose livelihoods depend on the cruise industry could lose everything, the complaint said.

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#### US Senators Introduce Bill to Establish Strategy, Objectives to Compete With China

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - Ranking members of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Bob Menendez and Jim Risch introduced on Thursday a comprehensive legislation laying out the principles, defining objectives and proposing a wide array of specific initiatives for the United States' strategic competition with China.

The 280-page bipartisan bill mandates the government to allocate sufficient funds and "properly align" the federal budget to meet the challenge, appoint a senior official responsible for the matter in every federal agency, strengthen US alliances and partnerships with a focus on the Indo-Pacific and Europe.

"The introduction of this legislation is one important step towards ensuring the United States is postured to compete with China for decades to come," Risch said in a statement.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee is expected to consider the Strategic Competition Act on April 14 at a markup session which precedes the full chamber deliberations.

The bill accuses China of leveraging its political, diplomatic, economic, military, technological and ideological power to become a strategic, near-peer global competitor of the United States.

"The current policies being pursued by the PRC threaten the future character of the international order and are shaping the rules, norms, and institutions that govern relations among states; will put at risk the ability of the United States to secure its national interests; will put at risk the future peace, prosperity, and freedom of the international community in the coming decades," the bill said.

The measure said the United States must adopt a policy of strategic competition with China as part of a broader strategic approach to the Indo-Pacific and the world to preserve a "free, open, democratic, inclusive, rules-based, stable, and diverse region," the bill added.

Among its multiple economic, military, diplomatic and humanitarian initiatives, the legislation calls for \$300 million in annual appropriations "to counter the malign influence of the Chinese Communist Party globally."

The bill also recommends \$655 million in Foreign Military Financing funding for the Indo-Pacific region. It advocates an enhanced partnership with Taiwan and expanded scope of the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States to scrutinize transactions with China for potential security risks.

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Finding Work After Pandemic May Be Difficult for Some Due to Tech Advances - US Fed Chief

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The US economy is likely to be more challenging when the coronavirus pandemic is over as companies will likely double-down on efforts to have better technology and fewer workers, complicating employment, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said Thursday.

"It's important to remember we're not going back to the same economy," Powell said at a discussion held on the sidelines of the IMF-World Bank meetings. "This will be a different economy. One of the things we hear from companies is that they've spent a lot of time since the pandemic arrived looking at ways to have more effective technology and perhaps fewer people." The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. About 8.5 million of those jobs may have not returned, data shows.

On Thursday, the latest weekly update from the Labor Department showed jobless claims from 744,000 Americans, up 2.2 percent from the previous week, demonstrating the job market's continued struggle with the coronavirus pandemic. The weekly update contrasted with the US jobs report for all of March showing an employment gain of 916,000 versus economists' expectations for a growth of just 660,000.

Powell predicted that when the pandemic was over, millions of Americans will likely have a hard time finding their way back into the workforce and recovering the job they had just over a year ago.

"This is what we call labor markets scarring, when people are out of work for a long period of time, the record shows empirically that their whole economic lives, and frankly their broader lives as human beings, can be damaged even permanently," the Fed chief said.

On the flip side, he said the outlook for US economic recovery remained bright from some \$6 trillion in total passed as Covid-19 relief and stimulus by both the Trump and Biden administrations since the outset of the pandemic.

The dramatic acceleration of the US vaccine program against COVID-19 was also highly encouraging, with nearly 20 percent of the population fully immunized already, he noted.

Yet, jobs recovery remained the biggest challenge of policymakers, he said, adding that the Fed hoped to see "a string of months like March" to affirm solid growth on the employment front.

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US to Provide Over \$150Mln in Aid to Ethiopia's Tigray - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States has allocated more than \$150 million in humanitarian assistance to Ethiopia's Tigray region, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"Today, the United States government through USAID announced more than \$152 million in additional humanitarian assistance to help the people affected by the crisis in Ethiopia's Tigray region," Price said.

Price said the assistance would provide life saving food, water, medical and health support, as well as shelter and protection to the people of the region.

"With this funding, the USAID Will provide more than 148,000 metric tones of urgently needed food assistance," he noted.

Fighting in Tigray broke out in November after the Ethiopian government accused the local ruling party — the Tigray People's Liberation Front — of attacking a regional military base to hijack weapons and arm the anti-government militia.

Since then, the conflict has pushed thousands of Ethiopian refugees to neighboring Sudan. International human rights groups have alleged possible crimes in Tigray, including those committed by Eritrean troops.

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US Working With Turkish, Afghan Parties to Plan Istanbul Conference - State Dept.



WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States is working with Turkish and Afghan counterparts to plan the Istanbul conference to help accelerate the peace process, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Planning is underway for a conference in Istanbul to accelerate the peace process... We are working with our Turkish counterparts and the Afghan parties to prepare for constructive participation in this conference," Price said in a press briefing.

The US-brokered conference on Afghanistan in Turkey is expected to take place later in April.

Last month, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken sent a letter to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani proposing to convene international stakeholders, including Russia, China, India, Iran and Pakistan, for a UN-facilitated conference on the Afghan peace process in Turkey.

Though the proposal was welcomed by the international community, the exact date of the meeting in the Turkish city of Istanbul has not yet been agreed upon, as the Taliban are still deliberating their participation.

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US Must Modernize Nuclear Arsenal to Ensure Deterrence Capability - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The US will modernize its nuclear arsenal to make sure it is capable of deterring any aggression from other countries, Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said in a briefing on Thursday.

"We have to modernize the nation's nuclear arsenal, we have to keep and maintain the stockpile to make sure that it is safe and effective, and we will continue to do that to ensure that we can deter nuclear aggression from other countries. Our nuclear deterrent is important and it is embedded in the values of that stockpile and we'll make sure that our people are safe," Granholm said.

With respect to the spent nuclear fuel, Granholm said that there is no answer at the moment but the department has worked out a solution that will be based on a "community agreement," and will announce it once it is ready.

Granholm also said the US will invest in more biofuels to power aircraft and ships.

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US Invests in Development of Biofuels for Aircraft, Ships - Energy Secretary

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – The US is investing in the development of aircraft and ship biofuels as well as in the reduction of methane emissions in the fossil fuel industry, Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said in a briefing on Thursday.

"Today, we are announcing another two funding opportunities for clean energy technology. One of them is to create next generation bio-fuels for airplanes and ships which are very hard to

electrify, and the second is to announce clean energy technology funding opportunity to reduce methane emissions from the coal, oil, and gas industry," Granholm said.

According to the Energy Department press release published today, the amount of funding for the initiatives is \$61.4 million and will help accelerate the US on its way to zero carbon emissions by 2050.

Aircraft and ships are very difficult to electrify and therefore require a doubling down on research and development to accomplish that, Granholm added as cited by the release.

Biofuels are produced by converting recently-living organic materials like crop waste, food waste, and algae into a liquid fuel, which can serve as a low-carbon equivalent to fossil-based fuels such as gasoline, jet, and diesel fuel, the release explained.

President Joe Biden's Jobs Plan announced in March envisions significant investments into the US infrastructure with green energy technologies being among the top priorities.

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#### **White House Says to Meet US Chipmakers, Auto Makers on Semiconductor Shortage**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan will meet with US companies next week to discuss a crisis over the shortage of microchips that has impacted the country's automobile production, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

"There is a lot of emphasis on the semiconductor chip problem in the federal government," Psaki told a media briefing, announcing the scheduled meeting.

US media reported earlier that Intel Corp. CEO Pat Gelsinger is among prominent executives from the microchip and auto makers who would attend the meeting. Gelsinger announced last month Intel's plans to spend \$20 billion on two new chip factories in the US state of Arizona. News of the meeting came after General Motors said it was temporarily idling or extending shutdowns at several automaking plants due to a microchip shortage.

General Motors said the plant closures could range from a week or two to several additional weeks for plants that have already been idled due to the parts disruption. The automaker has said it expects the problem will reduce its operating profit by \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion this year. Semiconductors are key components used in the infotainment, power steering and braking systems, among other areas.

One reason for the shortage of chips affecting automakers is that companies such as Intel were busy fulfilling orders for the consumer electronics industry, which has seen a quadrupling of demand for devices meant for both work and leisure as people spent more time at home during the coronavirus pandemic.

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## UN Calls on IMF to Explore Ways to Further Support Fragile Countries Amid Pandemic

UNITED NATIONS, April 8 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on the International Monetary Fund to explore how to further support developing countries combating the coronavirus pandemic following the outcome of the meeting of the world's finance chiefs of the G20, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

The spokesman said the UN Chief had welcomed the support of the G20 in its decision to extend the freeze on debts of vulnerable countries and call for a \$650 expansion of the International Monetary Fund's emergency reserves.

"We call on the IMF to explore how to further support vulnerable low-income and middle-income countries in line with its mandate, and also for them to work with their members to continue exploring ways for voluntary post-allocation channeling of Special Drawing Rights to support members' recovery efforts," Dujarric said.

Dujarric also reiterated Guterres' earlier appeal to adopt a three-phased approach to the debt crisis based on a debt standstill, targeted debt relief for the most vulnerable and a reform in the international debt architecture.

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## US Joins UN Group of Friends on Climate and Security - Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield

UNITED NATIONS, April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States has joined the UN Group of Friends on Climate and Security, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda-Thomas Greenfield said on Thursday.

"Today, I'm thrilled to be standing with my colleagues from Nauru and Germany to announce the United States has officially joined the UN Group of Friends on Climate and Security,"

Thomas-Greenfield told reporters at the United Nations.

Thomas-Greenfield said that in the past year, likewise other parts of the world that have seen droughts and rising sea levels, the United States has experienced extreme wildfires, hurricanes, storms and a blackout.

"It doesn't matter where you live. Climate change is a challenge for every person in every nation and on every single continent," she said.

The US envoy stressed that together with other nations, the United States can do its utmost to address climate emergency and stemming from it security threats.

The Co-chair of the Group of Friends on Climate and Security, German Ambassador Christoph Heusgen, said the members of the group were "extremely happy" to witness the US Joe Biden's administration return towards leadership on climate action.

"We have seen the old US administration not being a driving force," Heusgen pointed out. "To have the US back as a driving force is key."

Shortly after taking office on January 20, Biden re-joined the Paris climate agreement, reversing his predecessor Donald Trump's decision to leave the accord.



The UN's group of friends, which now has over 50 members, was initiated in 2018 by Germany and Nauru to facilitate cooperation among states to develop solutions for the impact of climate change on security policy.

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#### **White House Says Russia Has More Troops on Ukraine Border Than at Any Time Since 2014**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said during a press briefing on Thursday that Russia has more forces at the border with Ukraine than it has had there since 2014.

"The United States is increasingly concerned by recent escalation... in eastern Ukraine, including Russian troop movements on Ukraine's border," Psaki said. "Russia now has more troops on the border with Ukraine than at any time since 2014."

Earlier, Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff Dmitry Kozak said Russia is interested in a stable situation on the border and has no intention on infringing on Ukraine's sovereignty.

Psaki continued to say that five Ukrainian soldiers have been killed this week in fighting in the Donbas region.

"These are all deeply concerning signs," she said.

Psaki noted that the United States is discussing the tensions in the region with its NATO allies. In addition, Psaki said as a result of the ongoing US review of Russia's actions there will be consequences "seen and unseen."

"We hope to have more on that soon," she said.

Donbas has seen an escalation in the situation over the past weeks. On Wednesday, the head of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic Denis Pushilin said the situation at the contact line was deteriorating.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on Monday that joining NATO is the only way for the country to put an end to the conflict. In response, Dmitry Peskov, the Russian president's spokesman, said that Ukraine's accession to the alliance would only exacerbate the situation.

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#### **US Expects to Resume Iran Nuclear Talks in Coming Days, Potentially Next Week - State Dept**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States expects to resume the Iran negotiations in coming days, potentially next week, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"We expect the talks may resume in the coming days, potentially next week," Price said.

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US Working With Turkish, Afghan Parties to Plan Istanbul Conference - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States is working with Turkish and Afghan counterparts to plan the Istanbul conference to help accelerate the peace process, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Planning is underway for a conference in Istanbul to accelerate the peace process... We are working with our Turkish counterparts and the Afghan parties to prepare for constructive participation in this conference," Price said in a press briefing.

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US to Provide Over \$150M in Aid to Ethiopia's Tigray - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States has allocated more than \$150 million in humanitarian assistance to Ethiopia's Tigray region, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"Today, the United States government through USAID announced more than \$152 million in additional humanitarian assistance to help the people affected by the crisis in Ethiopia's Tigray region," Price said.

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Freeland Emphasizes Canada's Concerns With 'Buy America' Plan in Talks With Yellen

TORONTO, April 8 (Sputnik) - Canadian Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland emphasized Ottawa's concerns with the Biden administration's "Buy American" policy during a virtual meeting with US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, the US Finance Department said on Thursday.

"The Deputy Prime Minister reiterated Canada's concerns over the "Buy America" proposals and highlighted how free trade is beneficial to both economies," the Finance Department said in a statement.

Freeland and Yellen also discussed the fate of two Canadian nationals - former diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor - detained in China on espionage charges. The two officials agreed on the need for the immediate release of the "two Michaels," as the pair is referred to at home.

Kovrig and Spavor have now been detained in China for more than 800 days and Ottawa maintains that the "arbitrary" detentions came in retaliation for Canada detaining Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou in 2018 at the request of the United States.

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**US State of California Budgets \$536Bln for Upcoming Fire Season - Governor**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - California earmarked \$536 million for boost resilience to wildfires following a record-setting fire season last year, Governor Gavin Newsom and leaders of the state's Senate and Assembly said on Thursday.

"With California facing another extremely dry year, it is critical that we get a head start on reducing our fire risk. We are doing that by investing more than half a billion dollars on projects and programs that provide improved fire prevention for all parts of California," the governor and legislative leaders said in a joint press release.

California's fire season traditionally runs from May through October. But lately, the season begins earlier and ends later, a trend that some scientists attribute to climate change.

The \$536 million funding package includes \$125 million from Greenhouse Gas Reduction Funds and \$411 million from the General Fund, the release said.

The effort targets public and private lands vegetation management, community-focused efforts for prevention and resilience and economic stimulus for the forestry economy, the release also said.

California hopes to supplement the effort with matching federal disaster prevention grants for money earmarked to protect homes in areas vulnerable to fires, the release added.

Wildfires in California last year burned a record 4.2 million acres, damaged or destroyed 10,500 structures and killed 31 people, according to the state's Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

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**US Concerned By Violence in Northern Ireland, Calls for Calm - White House**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States is concerned by the recent violence in Northern Ireland and urges for calm, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"We are concerned by the violence in Northern Ireland and we join the British, Irish and Northern Irish leaders in their calls for calm," Psaki said. "We remain steadfast supporters of a secure and prosperous Northern Ireland in which all communities have a voice and enjoy the hard-won peace."

Psaki said she expects engagements and discussions on the crisis at the level of the State Department.



Earlier on Thursday Brandon Lewis, the UK government's secretary of state for Northern Ireland, called for an end to violence in Northern Ireland following a week of clashes between police and protesters demonstrating against the post-Brexit regulations governing the island of Ireland.

Protesters attacked police officers, threw petrol bombs, and hijacked a bus and set it on fire in Belfast on Wednesday night, and more than 40 law enforcement officers have suffered injuries during the week of unrest.

Northern Ireland's loyalists and unionists have expressed their unhappiness with post-Brexit arrangements that they allegedly say have created barriers between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

Tensions rose further last week when police decided not to prosecute 24 politicians from the republican Sinn Fein party, including Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill, for attending a funeral during strict COVID-19 restrictions.

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US Considering Sending Warships to Black Sea Amid Tensions Over Ukraine - CNN

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) The United States is considering sending warships to the Black Sea in the next several weeks in a show of support for Ukraine and as a warning to Russia, CNN reported on Thursday.

The US Navy routinely operates in the Black Sea, but a deployment of warships now would send a specific message to Russia that the United States is closely watching rising tensions along eastern Ukraine's borders, the report cited an unnamed US defense official.

The United States is required to give 14 days notice of its intention to enter the Black Sea under a 1936 treaty, but it is unclear if a notice has been sent, the report said.

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White House Says Russia Has More Troops on Ukraine Border Than at Any Time Since 2014

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - White House spokesperson Jen Psaki in a press briefing on Thursday said Russia has more forces at the border with Ukraine than it has had there since 2014.

"The United States is increasingly concerned by recent escalation... in eastern Ukraine, including Russian troop movements on Ukraine's border," Psaki said. "Russia now has more troops on the border with Ukraine than at any time since 2014."

Earlier, Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff Dmitry Kozak said Russia is interested in a stable situation on the border and has no intention to infringe on Ukraine's sovereignty.

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UN Special Envoy for Myanmar to Travel to Thailand, Other Countries This Week - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, April 8 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener will travel to the region this week as part of her efforts to promote a peaceful resolution the crisis after the recent military coup, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"The Secretary-General's Special Envoy from Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener will travel to the region this week. She will start off in Bangkok," Dujarric said. "In addition to Thailand, the Special Envoy is consulting on visits to other countries, as well as other neighboring countries. She has highlighted repeatedly: a robust international response to the ongoing crisis in Myanmar requires a unified regional effort involving neighboring countries."

Dujarric said with the UN Security Council's support, Schraner Burgener will continue to seek a visit to Myanmar to have discussions with the country's military aimed at contributing to democracy peace, and stability in the country.

While the UN Special Envoy's communication in wiring with the Myanmar military has been sustained, there have been no phone contacts in few weeks, according to the spokesperson.

"What she is hoping to have is, obviously, at some point, a face-to-face and more active dialogue with them," Dujarric said.

In addition to the trip to Thailand, Schraner Burgener is currently in discussions to go ahead with visits to other countries, including those that neighbor Myanmar, with the power to leverage influence towards stability in the country.

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US National Security Adviser to Meet Companies on Chip Shortage - White House

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - President Joseph Biden's National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan will meet with US companies next week to discuss a crisis over a shortage of microchips, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said Thursday.

"There is a lot of emphasis on the semiconductor chip problem in the federal government," Psaki told a press briefing after announcing the scheduled meeting.

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**US Budgets \$35Mln to Research Ways to Cut Methane in Fossil Fuel Production - Energy Dept.**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – A United States' research effort with \$35 million in new funding will attempt to reduce methane emissions from oil and gas wells, coal mines and engines powered with natural gas, the US Energy Department said on Thursday.

"Methane is the second-largest source of greenhouse gases, many times more potent than carbon dioxide - that's why it's crucial we develop solutions to decrease these emissions at their source," Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said in a press release announcing the effort.

The \$35 million effort, led by the Energy Department's Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy (ARPA-E), will attempt to develop technology to cut methane from oil and gas wells that burn off excess methane and reduce methane in coal mines, the release said.

In addition, the project seeks technology to cut methane in the exhaust from natural gas-fired engines used to drive compressors, generate electricity and increasingly power ships, the release added.

The program targets methane output from more than 50,000 engines, 300,000 flares and 250 mine shafts, according to the release.

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**Biden Administration to Announce More Actions On Gun Violence - White House**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will announce more anti-gun violence executive actions on top of the initial wave unveiled earlier in the day, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a briefing on Thursday.

"Today the Administration announced initial actions to address gun violence, there will be more. That is absolutely his commitment. He also will use the power of his presidency, his voice, his political will to advocate for actions in Congress," Psaki said. "He also recognizes that there are incredible roles to be played by many of the gun safety groups and leaders that were here today who have helped pass laws in states across the country on everything from background checks to red flag laws."

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## Biden Calls for Ending Legal Immunity for Gun Manufacturers

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden called on Congress on Thursday to eliminate legal immunity for gun manufacturers when their products are involved in mass shootings.

"We should... eliminate gun manufacturers from the immunity they receive from the Congress. The only industry in America, a billion dollar industry that can't be sued, exempt from being sued are gun manufacturers," Biden said in televised remarks.

Biden singled out the initiative as the one thing he would ask for if "the Lord came down" for his wish.

The US president announced a series of executive orders and requests for legislative action to address the epidemic of gun violence in the United States.

"Gun violence in this country is an epidemic and it's an international embarrassment. Every day in this country, 360 people are shot. Every single day 106 of them die," Biden said.

His executive orders direct the Justice Department to issue a proposed rule to help stop the proliferation of "ghost guns" - those that do not have a serial number, cannot be traced by law enforcement and are often distributed as self-assembly kits. The Justice Department will also propose a rule to further regulate the use of stabilizing braces that turn handguns into short-barreled rifles. It will also publish a model "red flag" legislation for states that can be used to bar people of concern from accessing firearms.

Additionally, Biden nominated gun control advocate David Chipman to serve as the Director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms.

"There is much more that Congress can do to help that effort. And they can do it right now. They have offered plenty of thoughts and prayers... but they passed not a single federal law to reduce gun violence. Enough prayers, time for some action," Biden said.

He specifically called for bills to close loopholes that allow bypassing background checks and urged to institute a permanent ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines.

Biden's bid was prompted by recent mass shootings in Georgia and Colorado which claimed 18 lives.

"You probably didn't hear it, but between those two incidents, less than one week apart, there are more than 850 additional shootings - 850 - that took the lives of more than 250 people and left 500 injured. This is an epidemic for God's sake and it has to stop," Biden said.

He estimated that gun violence costs the country \$250 billion annually in hospital and rehabilitation bills, legal fees and prison expenses.

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#### Annual US Intelligence Report Posits 5 Scenarios for World in 2040 - Report

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - Predictions of what the world will look like two decades from now range from a resurgence of democracy United States to a chaotic world in which big powers and non-state actors ignore international rules, a report released by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) said on Thursday.

The annual report offers five scenarios for the year 2040 beginning with "Renaissance of Democracies," the most optimistic.

"Rapid technological advancements fostered by public-private partnerships in the United States and other democratic societies are transforming the global economy, raising incomes, and improving the quality of life for millions around the globe," the report said.

A separate prediction titled, "A World Adrift," offers the most pessimistic of the five scenarios, in which the report described the world as "directionless, chaotic and volatile as international rules and institutions are largely ignored by major powers like China, regional players and non-state actors."

In between the two extremes, the report describes a scenario of "Competitive Coexistence," in which the United States and China prioritize economic growth with a robust trading relations alongside competition over political influence."

Another scenario titled, "Separate Silos," depicts a world with multiple economic and security blocs led by the United States, European Union, China and Russia.

A final scenario, "Tragedy and Mobilization," predicts an alliance between China and the EU leading the world in recovering from a global food catastrophe with "far-reaching" policies to address climate change, poverty and resource depletion.

The report is produced each year by the National Intelligence Council, a advisory body for ODNI and other US intelligence agencies that focuses on long-term strategic thinking.

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#### Muslim Advocacy Group Sues Facebook Over Not Deleting 'Hate Speech' Content

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The civil rights organization Muslim Advocates said in a release on Tuesday that it has filed a lawsuit against Facebook for allegedly misleading Congress about removing "hate speech" content that violates its community standards.

"Today, Muslim Advocates, Gupta Wessler PLLC and University of Chicago Law Professor Aziz Z. Huq filed a lawsuit alleging that Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Sheryl Sandberg and other Facebook executives have deceived Congress and consumers by falsely stating that the company removes content that violates its standards and policies," the release said.

Muslim Advocates said Facebook's top executives have falsely testified in Congress and promised to civil rights leaders that they are removing content violating the company's norms and policies, and by not doing so violated the District of Columbia Consumer Protection Procedures Act.

According to the advocacy group, Facebook refused to delete "hate speech" and "hate groups" content from its network on multiple occasions despite being informed about such content by Muslim Advocates.

Muslim Advocates demands that Facebook stops misrepresenting that it is removing hate speech content and pay damages in the amount of \$1,500 per violation but no more than \$74,999.

The First Amendment to the Constitution guarantees the right of Americans to free speech and expression.

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#### IMF Chief Says Important for US, China to 'Work in Sync' to Power World Economy

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said on Thursday that it is of crucial importance for China and the United States to work in sync to "power" the world economy .

"What we see today is the US and China being the two engines that are powering up the world economy. They are the first to be able to reach the pre-COVID-19 levels among the large economies," Georgieva said. "Like the engines on a plane, on which we are all passengers, it is important that they work in sync. Then, we can fly faster and we can get further."

Georgieva noted that the IMF is encouraged to see a consistent view expressed by both China and the United States on prospects for economic recovery and recognition of their roles in it.

Due to the strict China policy of former US President Donald Trump, the two countries are going through a so-called trade war in which they have imposed tit-for-tat tariffs on each other's goods.

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#### Half of US Voters Give Biden 'Poor' Grade on Handling Immigration - Poll

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden gets poor marks for his handling of immigration from half of US voters, despite approval from 62 percent of Democrats in a new Rasmussen Reports poll on Thursday.

"Not surprisingly, Republican voters give Biden much worse ratings than do Democrats. Sixty-two percent of Democrats rate Biden as excellent or good on his handling of immigration issues, compared to 12 percent of GOP [Republican] voters," a press release explaining the poll said.

Among all voters, 50 percent rate Biden's handling of immigration issues as "poor," compared with 35 percent who rate the president's performance as "excellent" or "good," the release said. Just 12 percent of Republicans surveyed gave Biden excellent or good marks, while 31 percent of voters not affiliated with either major party said the same, the release added.

The poll coincided with the release of data on migrants apprehended crossing the US-Mexican border in March – 172,331 people, up from 101,028 in February, and a 100 percent increase in unaccompanied children to nearly 19,000, according to the Customs and Border Protection agency.

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#### COVAX Organization Sends 38Mln Vaccine Doses to 100 Nations in 42 Days - UNICEF

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) has so far successfully distributed 38 million doses of three brands of coronavirus vaccines to more than 100 countries in 42 days, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), which oversees the program, said in a press release on Thursday.

"COVAX reaches over 100 economies, 42 s days after first international delivery," the release said. "The COVAX Facility has now delivered life-saving vaccines to over 100 economies since making its first international delivery to Ghana on February 24."

COVAX is a global initiative aimed at equitable access to coronavirus vaccines led by UNICEF, the release explained.

"So far, more than 38 million doses of vaccines from manufacturers AstraZeneca, Pfizer-BioNTech and Serum Institute of India (SII) have now been delivered, including 61 economies eligible for vaccines through the Gavi COVAX Advance Market Commitment," the release said.

Despite the reduced supply availability in March and April in part due to increased demand for coronavirus vaccines in India, COVAX expects to deliver doses to all participating economies that have requested vaccines in the first half of the year, the organization added.

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**Sullivan Expresses 'Grave Concern' Over Tigray Crisis to Ethiopia's Mekonnen – White House**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan in a phone call with Ethiopia's deputy prime minister expressed Washington's "grave concern" over the crisis in the Tigray region and discussed a possible ceasefire and departure of foreign troops, the White House said in a readout on Thursday.

"Sullivan spoke by phone on April 7 with Ethiopian Deputy Prime Minister Demeke Mekonnen. Mr. Sullivan expressed the Biden Administration's grave concern about the continued humanitarian and human rights crisis in the Tigray region," the readout said.

The two also discussed steps to address the crisis such as expanded humanitarian access, a cessation of hostilities and the departure of foreign troops, as well as independent probes of alleged rights abuses.

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**US Border Apprehensions Soar By 70% in March - Customs Agency**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - US border apprehensions rose by more than 70 percent in March amid a recent surge in migration toward the United States, the Customs and Border Protection Agency (CPB) said in new data released on Thursday.

US authorities apprehended 172,331 people in March, up from 101,028 in February, representing a 70.6 percent increase in the number of encounters with migrants, the data showed .

Authorities also encountered a record 18,890 unaccompanied minors in March, nearly double the 9,457 in February, the data showed.

CPB reported it expelled 103,900 individuals - single adults and family units - under guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and by using a law intended to protect the nation from immigrants with infectious diseases

The data suggests more than 68,000 were allowed to remain in the United States, although CBC did not cite a number in its press release announcing the data.

In the first six months of fiscal 2021, which began in October 2020, CBP said it caught 569,800 border crossers, an increase of 24 percent from all of fiscal 2020.

Critics charge that President Joe Biden created a crisis at the border by ending many, if not most restrictions imposed during the Trump administration to address a similar crisis in fiscal 2019, when authorities encountered more than 850,000 migrants – a number that dropped by more than half in 2019.

The administration attributes the 2020 decline to the coronavirus pandemic and refuses to call the present surge in border crossers a crisis.

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#### **US Slaps Sanctions on Myanmar's State Gem Company - Treasury**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States on Thursday imposed sanctions on Myanmar's state gem company in an attempt to deprive the country's military rulers of a major source of income, the US Department of Treasury announced on Thursday.

"Today, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated Myanma Gems Enterprise (MGE), a Burmese state-owned entity that is responsible for all gemstone activities in Burma," the department said in a statement.

It described gemstones as a key economic resource "for the Burmese [Myanmar's] military regime that is violently repressing pro-democracy protests in the country and that is responsible for the ongoing lethal attacks against the people of Burma, including the killing of children."

"Today's action highlights Treasury's commitment to denying the Burmese military sources of funding, including from key state-owned enterprises throughout Burma," OFAC Director Andrea Gacki said.

As a result of today's action, all property and interests in property of the entity that are in the United States or in the possession or control of US persons are blocked and must be reported to OFAC. In addition, any entities that are owned, directly or indirectly, 50 percent or more by one or more blocked persons are also blocked.

"These sanctions are not directed at the people of Burma," the department said.

On February 1, Myanmar's military overthrew the civilian government and declared a year-long state of emergency. The coup triggered mass protests met by the deadly violence, resulting in hundreds of people having been killed since then.

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#### **Over 50% of US Navy Population in Europe Received at Least 1 Vaccine Dose - Pentagon**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - More than 50 percent of US Navy military and beneficiaries received at least one dose of the coronavirus vaccines while US Air Force reported nearly 500,000 vaccines administered worldwide, Rear Admiral Gayle Shaffer said during a briefing on Thursday.

"For European locations, over 50 percent of the Department of the Navy's population, which includes family members, it also includes civilians, contractors and those from the host nation who are eligible to receive it, we have 50 percent of those individuals who have received at least 1 dose of the vaccine," Shaffer said.

With regard to the US Air Force, as of it has delivered 499,683 vaccines to over 125 sites worldwide and vaccinated 444,083 individuals, Maj. Gen. Robert Miller said during the briefing.



Moderna has been so far the primary vaccine shipped to Europe as Pfizer vaccine presents a challenge for overseas shipment for it requires extremely cold storage, Miller added. Department of Defense's vaccine allocation has been affected by the incident with 15 million doses of Johnson & Johnson vaccine but will continue be prioritized for overseas military contingents, Army Lt. Gen. Ronald Place said.

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**US Imposes New Myanmar Sanctions on Myanma Gems Enterprise - Treasury**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed new Myanmar-related sanctions on an entity in the country in its latest response to the military coup in February, the Treasury Department said on Thursday.

The new sanctions target Myanma Gems Enterprise, the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control said in a notice on its website.

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**US Expands Testing of New Software to Guard Emergency Networks From Hacks - Homeland Dept.**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - Pilot tests of new threat detection and mitigation software developed by US contractor SecuLore Solutions will expand to emergency call centers across the US, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said on Thursday.

"Currently, SecuLore is pilot testing its newly developed cybersecurity solution with the Palm Beach County, Fla. [Florida] Emergency Services Department and will expand the pilot testing to five additional ECCs [emergency communication services] across the country," a DHS press release said.

SecuLore is funded by the DHS Science and Technology Directorate, which supports US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), the agency charged with defending critical infrastructure, the release said.

SecuLore recently added a new capability to its existing cybersecurity solutions to provide near-real-time behavioral threat analysis of the traffic hitting an ECC network and recommend remediation steps that are based on the behavior and/or the type of malware, the release added.

For a minimum of two months, each pilot partner will test the new capability, which includes 24-hour oversight of security operations, a weekly vulnerabilities report and immediate notification of any critical vulnerability, according to the release.

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**US Blacklists 7 Chinese Entities Over 'Destabilizing' Military Activities - Commerce Dept**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States has blacklisted seven Chinese supercomputing entities for allegedly engaging in military modernization efforts that pose a threat to US national security, the Commerce Department said in a press release on Thursday. "The Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) has added seven Chinese supercomputing entities to the Entity List for conducting activities that are contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States," the release said. "These entities are involved with building supercomputers used by China's military actors, its destabilizing military modernization efforts, and/or weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs."

Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo noted that supercomputing capabilities have multiple modern military uses including nuclear and hypersonic weapons.

"The Department of Commerce will use the full extent of its authorities to prevent China from leveraging U.S. technologies to support these destabilizing military modernization efforts," she said in the release.

The blacklisted firms include Tianjin Phytium Information Technology, Shanghai High-Performance Integrated Circuit Design Center, Sunway Microelectronics, the National Supercomputing Center Jinan, the National Supercomputing Center Shenzhen, the National Supercomputing Center Wuxi, and the National Supercomputing Center Zhengzhou, according to the release.

Tension in relations between Beijing and the West escalated in late March after the EU, along with Canada, the UK and the US, introduced a series of sanctions against Chinese citizens and organizations over alleged poor human rights records and what they perceive as persecution of the Uyghur Muslim minority in Xinjiang. Beijing responded by imposing retaliatory sanctions.

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**US Weekly Jobless Claims up Over 2% as Struggle With COVID Continues - Labor Dept.**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - Some 744,000 Americans filed for jobless claims last week, up 2.2 percent from the previous week, according to Labor Department data on Thursday that demonstrated the job market's continued struggle with the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending April 3, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 744,000, an increase of 16,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a news release.

In the previous week to March 27, filings for jobless benefits rose to 728,000, rising back above the 700,000 level it broke below the prior week, the first time since the COVID-19 breakout a year ago.

Economists polled by US media had forecast 680,000 jobless claims filings for last week to continue with the narrative of an improving labor market.

There were not many clues for the jump of more than 2 percent in weekly claims. Some analysts thought the numbers may have been higher if not for last week's Good Friday holiday in some US territories.

The "Easter (break) could skew these numbers for a couple weeks," Adam Button, economist at ForexLive, said in a commentary.

Some pointed to the persistent drop in continuing jobless weekly claims as a sign of labor market progress. Continuing weekly claims — reported with a one-week lag — slid to 3.73 million for the week ended April 3, from 3.75 million during the week to March 27.

The weekly reading for annual unemployment was at 2.6 percent, unchanged from the previous week. While this number is included in each weekly report on jobless claims, policymakers tend to, however, look at the monthly unemployment rate as a better gauge of the overall jobs picture. The last monthly unemployment rate published by the Labor Department was 6 percent for March.

A year into the COVID-19 crisis, restoring job growth remains one of the biggest challenges of US policymakers.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. About 8.5 million of those jobs may have not returned, data shows.

The US economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, after a 2.2 percent growth in 2019.

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**US Blacklists 7 Chinese Entities Over 'Destabilizing' Military Activities - Commerce Dept**

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States has blacklisted seven Chinese supercomputing entities for allegedly engaging in military modernization efforts that pose a threat to US national security, the Commerce Department said in a press release on Thursday. "The Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) has added seven Chinese supercomputing entities to the Entity List for conducting activities that are contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States," the release said. "These entities are involved with building supercomputers used by China's military actors, its destabilizing military modernization efforts, and/or weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs."

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#### US Calls For 'Significant Action' to Support Developing Economies – Yellen

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – The United States is calling on the world's major economies to take "significant action" to support developing countries amid the current economic crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Thursday.

"With limited policy options and longstanding structural challenges, many developing countries have not been able to support their economies through the crisis. Without significant action, we could face a permanent divergence in the global economy," Yellen said in a statement before the International Monetary and Financial Committee (IMFC).

Yellen urged the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank Group (WBG) to continue working on financial support and other ways to provide help to their members. She also encouraged countries to cooperate with both these institutions in developing macroeconomic and structural reform agendas.

"To provide support alongside these efforts, the United States supports enhancing concessional lending at the IMF and WBG, alongside G20 debt relief initiatives, and pursuing an SDR [Special Drawing Rights] allocation," she said.

The Biden administration is committed to work with foreign partners, including the IMF and WBG, to help the world emerge from the crisis, Yellen added.

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#### US Weekly Jobless Claims at 744,000 Last Week - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - Some 744,000 Americans filed for jobless claims last week, according to Labor Department data on Thursday that showed weekly filings remaining above the 700,000 level that economists say demonstrates the job market's struggle to turn the corner with the coronavirus pandemic.



"In the week ending April 3, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 744,000, an increase of 16,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a news release.